



Patricia McKissack

“ “

I write because there's a need to have books for, by, and about the African American experience and how we helped to develop this country.

— Virginia Hamilton Conference, Kent University

” ”

Quick Facts

- * Born in 1944
- * African-American children's book writer
- * Author of *Mirandy* and *Brother Wind*

Biography

Patricia L'Ann Carwell was born to the civil servant parents Robert and Erma Carwell on August 9, 1944, in the small town of Smyrna, Tennessee. The Carwell family moved North to St. Louis, Missouri when McKissack was three. The family moved apart after Erma and Robert divorced. McKissack remained with her paternal grandparents in St. Louis, while her mother and siblings, Robert Nolan and Sarah Francis, moved back to Tennessee. At the age of twelve, McKissack left St. Louis and rejoined her mother, brother, sister, and maternal grandparents in Nashville. This move back to Tennessee brought Pat McKissack the friendship of Fredrick McKissack, who would become her future husband many years later.

Pat and Fred McKissack both attended Tennessee State University in Nashville, where they were able to rekindle their friendship. Their one-time childhood relationship as neighborhood playmates grew into an adult love. "I had known him all my life. We grew up in the same town, where every family knew every other family, but [Fred] was five years older and you just didn't date boys who were five years older than you. When I was fifteen and he was twenty dating was forbidden. But when I was twenty and he was twenty-five it was perfectly okay."

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The couple married on December 12, 1964, four months after Fredrick proposed on their second date. Eventually their family grew from two to five with the birth of their three sons, Fredrick Lemuel and the twins, Robert and John.

Pat McKissack graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English at Tennessee State University in the same year of her marriage, 1964. After this, she returned to St. Louis to further her education. She received her Masters in Early Childhood Literature and Media Programming at Webster University. She graduated in 1975.

After making careers in the fields of both teaching and editing children's books, Patricia McKissack, with the help of her husband, decided to become a full-time writer of children's and young adult books designed for and about African Americans. "I remember sitting in our car -- just the two of us -- and Fred asked, 'If you could do anything you want to do in this whole wide world for the rest of your life, what would you do?' I said, 'Write books. ' And he said, 'Okay-let's do that. We'll take it as far as we can go. We'll take it day by day. '"

Thus, they set out together with a hope "to enlighten, to change attitudes, to set goals-to build bridges with books." Whether working solo or assisted by her husband, Patricia McKissack has written nearly one hundred children's picture books, young adult novels, and non-fiction biographies about African Americans and their cultural experiences and histories.

Mirandy and Brother Wind (1988) is a primary example of McKissack's incredible use of African American cultural themes and language. McKissack places the focus of this children's picture book on an annual cakewalk, a traditional African American-derived celebration. The star of this book is Mirandy, a strong-willed, goal-oriented young African American. Mirandy wants to win the prize cake at the annual junior cakewalk, dancing with her head held high and proud, embodying the free and powerful spirit of the spring winds, "Brother Wind," her desired dance partner. Brother Wind is representational of African American tradition. He is a symbol for the African American race who, as slaves, knew and dreamed of a day when their people would someday be free and powerful. "Can't nobody put shackles on Brother Wind, chile. He be special. He be free" (5).



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This story encourages young children to overcome any obstacles, no matter how seemingly impossible, that stand between them and their goals while maintaining strong family and friendship values and relationships. By using the historical Black cultural themes of the cakewalk and Brother Wind, Patricia McKissack's *Mirandy and Brother Wind* "contribute[s] to literacy by advancing resistance to structures of dominance and control" (Davis 67).

McKissack developed a love for reading and writing at a young age. "I began writing at an early age. I had pen pals in three countries. I remember writing a poem in third grade. My teacher liked it and told me it was well written. That thrilled me." McKissack learned the importance of her creativity and writing gift from the encouragement she received from her family, friends, and teachers. In *A Million Fish-More or Less* (1992), another picture book, Patricia McKissack becomes the one giving words of encouragement. This story teaches children the importance and power of words and imagination through the adventures of the main character Hugh Thomas. "'Tell us, now, was it really a million [fish caught]?' A smile broke across Hugh Thomas's face, and he winked his eye. 'More or less,' he answered, and started right in on his tale" (29). The accuracy is not always important in a story meant to entertain and please. McKissack makes her readers aware of this idea through her storytelling character Hugh Thomas. By doing this, she is encouraging her young readers to put their creative stories to use.

Many of Patricia McKissack's words and stories are not solely a part of her wonderful imagination; her books are often inspired by the traditions and personalities of her family. The storytelling style and themes of her grandparents' "yarns" inspired her to write *The Dark-Thirty: Southern Tales of the Supernatural*. Written in 1992, *The Dark-Thirty* is representational of McKissack's childhood and the enjoyment she felt while listening to her grandmother spin ghost tales in those minutes after sunset, but before nightfall and complete darkness took hold of the sky. These ten "original stories rooted in African American history and the oral storytelling tradition" are entertaining for all ages because they encompass a variety of styles and subject matter and are encouraged to be read aloud in the same style Pat's grandmother once used. This can especially be said of the second piece to this book entitled "We Organized."



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“We Organized” is a poem based upon a slave narrative recorded during the Great Depression. The language McKissack uses in this poem captures the quality of African American culture that makes it desirable to be spoken rather than read. “You ask how we all got free ‘fore / President Lincoln signed the paper? / Write this what I tell you. / I, Ajax, / Massa’s driver’ / I, Ajax, / Master of the whip’ Got power! / ‘Now, you ask me how we all got free / ‘Fore Massa Lincoln sign the paper? / Take heed. / Like them hornets, we organized!” (20-25). Thus, *The Dark-Thirty* furthers the tradition of telling chilling oral stories, promoting family values, and building strong relationships from reader to reader.

Color Me Dark: The Diary of Nellie Lee Love, The Great Migration North, Chicago, Illinois, 1919 (2000), was also inspired by McKissack’s family strength, stories, and histories. Her paternal grandfather would “tell [her] stories about how he and his brother had left Nashville at seventeen and eighteen going to Chicago in search of opportunity.” Although the two brothers arrived in Chicago during the riots of 1919, they remained together and strong. One of many in Scholastic’s Dear America Series, which is designed for young adult readers, *Color Me Dark* invites the reader deep into the life of Nellie Lee Love and her family. By doing this, McKissack is encouraging her readers to experience and share in their own family’s trials and tribulations. By writing *Color Me Dark*, Pat hoped “for [her] readers to feel that ‘family’ means unity, [because] in unity there is strength.” Through unity and organization hope and victory is achieved.

Pat McKissack also introduces her young adult readers to many African American Civil Activists, including W.E.B. DuBois, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Madame C.J. Walker in this diary formatted novel. Thus, she provides much needed education for African American adolescents about the Black past and the people that helped further their freedom and equality. McKissack best describes the feelings of hope and unity among African Americans and their families during this time period through the words of Nellie Lee Love’s father. “A colored family is like a bouquet of flowers-all different colors, sizes, and shapes. But each one is beautiful in his or her own way” (6). The novel’s language, characters, and context present the importance of the African American race in society, and help children overcome hardships resulting from racial prejudice.



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Patricia McKissack has written many biographies on famous and significant African Americans, usually in collaboration with her husband, who is involved in the research process. Some of these titles include *Jesse Jackson: A Biography* (1989), *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Man of Peace* (1991), and *Sojourner Truth* (1992). However, *Can You Imagine?* (1997) is one of her more unique non-fiction writings because it is an autobiography of her own life as a writer. As well as introducing her life history, *Can You Imagine?* goes one step further than the encouragement of imagination in *A Million Fish-More or Less* by explaining the processes involved in writing a story. McKissack gives children the ability to see writing as more than a school assignment in this work of non-fiction, teaching them the steps to take when applying their creativity to the written word.

By writing of African American experiences in hopes of entertaining and educating children about their culture and history, Patricia McKissack has helped to fill a vacuum in children's literature for minority groups. With her goal of "try[ing] to create characters children enjoy reading about' [so] they will then read more and thus read better," McKissack has won many literary awards and honors for her writing. Some of these include the Caldecott Honor for *Mirandy and Brother Wind*, and the Newbery Honor and the Coretta Scott King Award for *The Dark-Thirty: Southern Tales of the Supernatural*. Not only has Pat McKissack filled a void in minority group children's literature, she has also won the hearts of many children and their parents with her many contribution of books on a variety of African American themes.



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